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# RIT

## **AVENTURESCENCE**

by

Gracia E. Nash

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Glass

School for American Crafts

College of Art & Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

August 14th, 2019



## **COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE**

**Thesis Title:** Aventurescence

**Student Name:** Gracia E. Nash

### **Thesis Committee Final Approvals**

**Chief Advisor:** David Schnuckel

Signature:

Date:

**Associate Advisor:** Suzanne Peck

Signature:

Date:

**Associate Advisor:** Elizabeth Kronfield

Signature:

Date:

**Administrative Chair:** Glen Hintz

Signature:

Date:

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*AVENTURESCENCE* : a·ven·tu·res·cence (ə-vĕn'chə-rĕs'əns)

n. an optical reflectance effect seen in certain translucent minerals, caused by  
the presence of tiny, aligned inclusions of other minerals  
and manifesting itself as brightly colored reflections

### **THESIS ABSTRACT:**

Aventurescence explores ideas of comfort and identity through glass and the body. I am interested in the material qualities and limitations of glass, including luminosity, flexibility, and fragility; and the ways in which these can be expressed and communicated through the body. To expand the material's flexibility I used a combination of multiple glass bodies and silicones to create glass textiles and objects with flexible surfaces. I also used traditional fusing methods and alternative glasses (reflective glass beads) to create sheets and screens. These objects and textiles parallel skin, and communicate with the body through object, performance, and the consequent documentation of performance. The culmination of my research was a cohesive body of work, utilizing the body, silicones, and glass, to create objects, performance, and installation.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

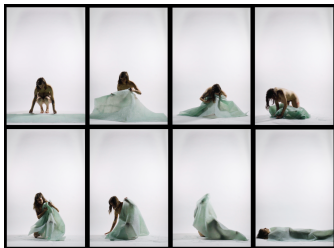
Through glass, the body, and textile practices my thesis work examines the transience of identity; specifically, in the universal search for emotional and physical comfort in one's definition of self. Using my own memories as inspiration I performed and documented visual and tactile experiences to elicit responses rooted in the audience's own memory, empathy, and emotion. My thesis work consists of interactive pieces made predominantly from glass. Some are solid sheets, some are glass textile based - flexible sheets of glass - created through a process of fusing and the addition of silicones, to explore glass as sheets, skins, and screens. These objects reference and interact with the body to challenge ideas of comfort and perception. They become interactive tools to directly explore a sense of self-ness and the internal and external perception of said self-ness. My work analyzes the ways in which we filter through experiences and memories to formulate an identity that we find comfort in, and the origins of that filter. What throughout our lives become the foundation of who we are?

## **SECTION I: CONTEXT**

Aventurescence references my sense of self through the use of my physical body and the abstraction of the body through representation of our largest and most sensitive organ - our skin. Skin is our body's interactive membrane - permeable, manipulable, soft. It is easily damaged but has the capacity to heal. Membranes can be stiff - like glass panels or windows, or flexible - like the silicone-infused glass sheets that I reconcile with physically, embrace, and encase my body in. These glass textiles mimic skin physically and conceptually. Glass is a material viewed as fragile but in reality can be

extremely strong and resilient. With the addition of silicones, the glass sheets become malleable, flexible, and appear soft. They are alluring and their curious and oxymoronic nature beg them to be touched.

My work explores ideas of comfort in selfness through the inclusion of specialty, reflective glass beads. These beads, typically used for industrial and construction purposes to mark roads, tarmacs, and signage, translate conceptually to me about ideas of safety, comfort, and protection. Like signage that provide directions, these beads acted as a material guide for the work. Much like skin, the beads create a barrier to mark areas of protection, acting as armor for moments of weakness or transition. But the glass beads possess a physical duality that cannot be negated; they are inherently alluring and come alive through light and movement. I was first drawn to their ability to make light dance and play but they became more conceptually charged the more I explored; the beads soon became a



*Lay Me Down to Rest*  
Glass, Silicone, Body  
Stills from performance video  
2018

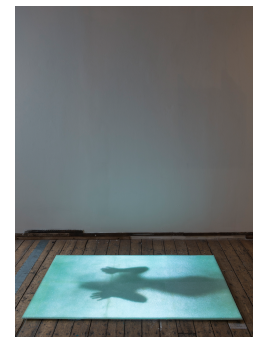
the inspiration for pieces like  
*Push*, *Lay Me Down to Rest*, and  
*What Lies Beneath*, performances

that embody the physical and metaphysical  
journey of the unknowns of self-discovery.

To me, the term adventurescence embodies both glass and skin. It speaks to the luminosity of glass as a material and how the particulate catches light and sheds into space. It speaks to the natural luminosity of skin - from the minuscule pores to large undulations of flesh that reflect light and change through



*Push*  
Glass, Silicone, Body  
Stills from performance video  
2018



*What Lies Beneath*  
Reflective Glass Beads, Body,  
Projection  
37" x 56" x 1/4"  
2019

movement. When magnified pores become singular points of reflection, similar to the way glass beads reflect light. The wrinkles on bodies create moments of shadow and illumination through form, like my glass blanket in *Lay Me Down to Rest*.

Much of my inspiration comes from personal experience and memory. Our bodies experience physical reactions that we cannot stop. There are parts of the brain like the limbic system that control our reactions to stimuli. The limbic system controls everything from emotions to physical reactions, known as the “feeling and reacting brain”, rather than the “thinking brain” (Swenson 9). Fight or flight. Flinching when threatened. Crying from physical pain. These reactions are universal and uncontrollable. In my youth I was diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder. I have always felt more sensitive to touch and stimuli. This sensitivity effects the way I work, touch, and think of material. My skin is my medium to interact with the world; it is my largest organ, it is permeable, it is sensitive and easily damaged. I think of my body as an instrument to create, interact, and document the things around me. Skin, as an organ, is a unifier. But it also something that causes judgements and pre-conceptions.

Glass is an inherently alluring material, considered precious and beautiful. It has a quality of seduction similar to skin and the body; its beauty lies within its ability to hold a gaze and strike curiosity. I view glass as another body, as an entity that must be respected in order to converse with. It has a life cycle. If not given the proper conditions after going through a change, it can and will most likely break. In it's molten state, it's state of change, it is luscious and untouchable. But while it cools and attempts to retain it's stability, it requires specific environmental factors in order to maintain it's stability

and become solid again. These conceptual parallels between the body, identity, and glass, have informed my object making and performative work.

## SECTION II: THE BODY OF WORK AND EVOLUTION

Exploring the parallels between skin and glass textiles ultimately began with *Shed*. During my undergraduate studies I was using thin sheets of fired frit to rebuild damaged animal skulls in a series titled *Mend*. This began my fascination with glass's ability to parallel other materials; by controlling the texture and colors of my frit sheets, I could create something that would



*Mend Series*  
(above: Ram, below: Deer)  
Skulls, Glass  
Various dimensions  
2013-2014



mimic other natural materials. I started using these frit sheets to build sculptures, but quickly became frustrated with the rigidity of the sheets.



*Shed*  
Glass, Silicone, Body  
2018

The testing began. I wanted to invent a way to make these sheets flex and bend. I experimented with firing schedules, the thickness of my sheets, different glass bodies, and different binders and silicones. Tack fusing System 96 Euroboros fine frit, either sifted or poured into a sheet about 2mm thick, creat-

ed a sheet that maintained its texture but was still thin enough to easily break apart post-fire. After firing, a thin layer of silicone was added on the back. I experimented with adding sheer and different types of fabric to the sheets but this distracted from their luminosity and texture, proving unnecessary. After a full cure, a glass cylinder was rolled

over each sheet in multiple directions; breaking the sheet up and providing the flexibility. These sheets could then be adhered to each other with more silicone and be used to build larger forms like the dress in *Shed*.

The next step was to experiment with ways to build volume and form while maintaining a size and shape adequate to contour the body. An adjustable dress form set to one inch larger than my body measurements allowed for a small amount of extra space around the dress, and provided the proper temporary base structure. I began testing materials that the silicone would release from without altering the color or quality of the sheet. The best release that could be attached to the dress form was saran wrap, which is easily applied, peeled away, and does not visually alter the silicone or glass surface.

After *Shed* I began troubleshooting the process to improve upon it. The weight and constant flexing of the material required a silicone that had a higher tensile strength and flexibility than the window-sealant grade silicone I was using. After looking through different products used for mold making, movie props, and prosthetics, I tested different products from the Dragon Skin line from Smooth-On; Dragon Skin FX Pro was very strong, clear in color, and could be thickened with Thi-vex so it could be painted onto surfaces without running off.

After *Shed*, I wanted to create a piece that directly involved the body and its interaction with the object. *Shed* was passive; an exploration of skins and shells and the rebirth and change that occurs during the process of shedding. Identity is transient and morphs and changes through time. *Shed* was a literal exploration of creating a shell for myself that mimics the shedding skins of natural entities, like snakes and insects. It be-



came about the process of building a form up piece by piece; similar to how coral grows, how skin and scales regenerate, how insects weave cocoons, how birds build nests.

Cocoons are pods where growth and change in identity takes place. I wanted to create a pod that could incase my body, that could flex and move while my body interacted with the form; not a passive wearable, but something that would be activated. A body interactive. While *Shed* was an adornment inspired by natural forms, my work is not necessarily interested in adornment but rather in internal transition and change. *Push* is non-ornamental. It functions to provide a place where change could take place, a battlefield for one. The moments in life where one experiences growth are often tumultuous and all-consuming. These feelings became the inspiration for *Push*, uncomfortable but necessary.



*Push*  
Glass, Silicone, Body  
Stills from performance video  
2018

I wanted to find a glass body that would embody a safe space. The moments that change identity are often vulnerable; the pod needed to be made of something that could protect. This led me to research reflective glass beads. These beads are typically used for construction and utilitarian purposes, mixed into paint and used to mark areas of the road or environments that need to be seen and avoided. Because the beads are spherical they refract light back and are extremely visible and reflective. By using these beads I could create a pod that embodied a safe space, an environment where foreign entry is off-bounds.

*Push* is my first dive into performance work and explores the vulnerable moments where chance can occur. It is a physical manifestation of the emotional struggle

that happens during personal growth. The pod was time based, and by moving, pushing, and stretching the material, it eventually ripped apart and the body inside was able to move on; but the action was an obvious struggle of breath and movement. Using the body as a material became a way for me to humanize my work.

While making *Push* I became interested in body as the activating material. Using my body allows me to comment on identity and the outside perception imposed upon it. As performance artist Linda Montano once said about her use of her own body, “I always feel changed, transformed, energized by the work” (Roth 118). This rings true and has similarly fueled my own desire to push my process. *Push* also began my journey with the reflective glass beads.

*Amorphous Flesh* was the next exploration using the unfired reflective beads and silicone, but this time utilizing body molds to create a fleshy blob that interacted with the audience via LEDs connected to proximity and infrared sensors. Like a body, it becomes activated by the stimuli of proximity (physically indirect) and touch (physically direct). Unlike my other work *Amorphous Flesh* requires the audience for activation. The found object base, the vintage yellow chair, is meant to place the piece in a domestic setting, providing the viewer a position of familiarity. The fleshy blob pinned to the chair cushion, made from molds taken from my body, represents an abstracted version of my self while remaining obscure. Communication has been something I’ve consistently struggled with despite my desire to express myself and make connections. Silently curious, the fleshy blob cannot communicate anything specific when approached or interacted with,



*Amorphous Flesh*  
Reflective Glass Beads, Silicone,  
LEDs, Sensors, Glass Head Pins, Chair  
31" x 32" x 32"  
2018

it can only glow, slowly dim, and fade until it falls dark. By combining clear silicone and the reflective glass beds, the light from below turns the beads into the texture of pores and the silicone into the warm glow of flesh.

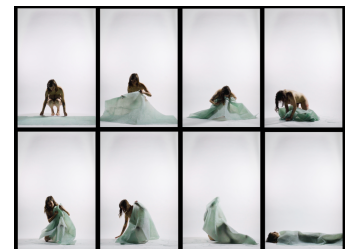
The more time I spent with the reflective glass beads the more entranced I became. They are inherently alluring and come alive through light and movement. Because they are an alternative material, further experiments with different schedules and temperatures was required to maintain their texture and stability. If over fired, they lose their shape and reflectivity; if under fired, they lack structure. If too many layers are built up they become less reflective as well. I began testing schedules to learn their coefficient and how to fuse them in various ways; how to tack-fuse them thin enough to make textiles and how to fuse them thick enough to stand alone as a sheet without losing the texture and allowing them to be reflective. These tests resulted

in *Lay Me Down to Rest*. The desire was to scale the textiles large enough to create a blanket that could cover the body.

Similar to quilting, I created pieces of the whole that could be pieced together. Small fused sheets were combined to create

a singular, flat object that could cover the body. The silicone became the batting between the layers, and the second layer

was sifted onto of the silicone before. My body became the tool to sculpt the blanket into something useable. Through the performance, the blanket changes from a solid sheet to flexible surface. Without the actions of my body, without the effort and struggle and pain spent to alter it, it cannot serve its ultimate function; to protect, to comfort, to rest.



*Lay Me Down to Rest*  
Glass, Silicone, Body  
Still from performance video  
2018

And through those actions, the body was able to rest and find emotional and physical comfort, but not without the physical marks being left on the body as result.

Quilts are an object that my family has always held dear. My grandmother was a quilter and often gifted quilts to newly born members of the family. I was no exception; when I was born I was given a quilt that slowly became a safety blanket for me, carried around in my younger years until it became remnants of it's former self. I view quilts and blankets as embraces of safety, a place that one can rest and be at ease.

This physical marking of the body during *Lay Me Down to Rest* led to me create *Like a Peach*. Glass is something that all viewers recognize as potentially dangerous; it is sharp and can do damage. I wanted to explore this reaction to the body in a more intimate, subtle way, and explore ideas of identity and worth imposed by both the self and the other. I started with a pair of woman's wedding gloves, and covered them with a mixture of silicone and unfired frit. These gloves maintained the glimmering, raw, scratchy quality of particulate glass - capable of leaving a mark on the skin that was both subtle in its visibility and permanence, as well as the remnants of light catching glass, fragments of the gloves. The mark is visceral and beautiful, which is then translated to the viewer via the book documentation through the tactile sensation of the book covers and the visuals of the images.



*Like a Peach* (installation views)  
Glass, Silicone, Wedding Gloves, Body  
2018

*Like a Peach* is all about touch. Touch is our first form of communication; before we are even able to speak we possess the ability to reach out and touch what is around us. To me, touch is the strongest sensory experience. From the creation of the gloves

by the hand, to the wearing on the hand, to the gripping by the hand, the impetus remains to be touch. The touch though the gloves is ultimately what acts as the mark maker on flesh. Touch also influences and embodies how the audience experiences the piece through the books. The books, measuring 3 3/4" by 5" and covered with the same material the gloves are fabricated from, are just small enough to fill the palms of the viewer. The viewer's hands become a proxy for the gloves; as they view the images of the mark making on skin, their hands simultaneously experience the texture of the gloves and the remnants of glass that remain post-exposure. The visual of the mark making on skin, through the photographs in the book, is experienced simultaneously with the mark making texture via the cover of the book, providing the viewer a similar sensorial experience that the performer felt.

*What Lies Beneath* was the final inclusion to my thesis body of work. I wanted to explore the reflective glass beads as a solid screen, and how the body could be abstracted through the screen. After making the blanket in *Lay Me Down to Rest*, I realized that the material had the ability to play with proximity and touch. Through back lighting



*What Lies Beneath*  
Reflective Glass Beads, Body,  
Projection  
37" x 56" x 1/4"  
2019

the shadow behind the screen becomes alive. The closer the figure's touch, the easier it is to make out; but as it retreats the shadow of its existence disappears. There is a duality between the screen and the skin - meaning the body, the self; often there are parts of the self that are kept beneath the surface. I began thinking of the parts of identity that we keep secret, the ones we either hide consciously or subconsciously. They scratch and caress but never make their way to the surface. Screens are

membranes, skins that we interact with via touch. *What Lies Beneath* explores the pieces of identity that may not want to be openly expressed. The reflective glass bead panel, laying on the ground, becomes an icy portal that is viewed from above. The figure and panel are both enchanting and haunting at the same time. The projection of the video causes the panel to glow and draws the viewer in, presenting the eerie and seductive figure contained beneath it's surface.

Performance allowed me think of my work beyond the object. I want my performances to be less scripted and more serendipitous. The object and it's honest interaction with my body is the most important thing. Authenticity is my goal and because of this, I set simple restraints for myself; how do I enter, exit, or stay in the frame, where is my gaze focused? The rest is to happen naturally. Display during the exhibition was meant to provide authenticity as well. The videos are document of the performance, and the objects are physical relics of action. The objects, be it blanket, pod, gloves, are displayed in their final performative state, allowing the viewer to experience the video and objects sensorially and place themselves in the performer's metaphorical shoes.

### **SECTION III: INSPIRATION**

Movements like Fluxus Happenings have influenced the way I choose to interact with objects during my performative work. I participated in my first Happening while completing my BFA, and became fascinated by the spontaneity of the actions and the body to object and body to body relationships that I experienced. Fluxus is interested in when "not simply objects are produced, but object in space, objects in relationships, objects in meditation" (Sell 206). The objects in my performances, along with my body and

skin, become the serendipitous instructions for how the piece will play out. The relationship that is created between them, the movements a body makes, the cadence of the performance, is dictated more by the object than by a step-by-step plan. The parameters of my performances are created by the object and what the object demand. The gloves must make marks, but the marks cannot completely be controlled or pre-conceived. The blanket must be broken down, but the time that it takes or the way it affects the body is not pre-conceived. The objects require a body and action to activate. These actions can be intimate or everyday. The performances are less about the objects themselves but the happenings that occur because of their interactions.

The Body Art movement has also informed how I interact with the wearables and body interactives I create. Sometimes, the interactions between my body and the objects create a physical reaction, from the rash and scratches of *Like a Peach*, to the physical struggle in *Push*, to the cuts and blood of *Lay Me Down to Rest*. My body is vulnerable, but no less or more than any other body. Similar to Gina Pane's *The Conditioning*, I am relying the empathy of the audience, or lack there of, to question the audience's perception and reaction to a bodily, visceral experience. In *The Conditioning*, Pane lays atop a metal bed with candles lit below her. Throughout the thirty minute performance, her discomfort from the slowly heated metal becomes apparent to the audience through her physical reactions. Without the inclusion of the physical body, the witness to its actions or the evidence of its vulnerabilities, this visceral experience and reaction of the audience would not be possible.

My glass work is also influenced by my explorations in other materials. I am interested in soft-sculpture and sewing techniques like quilting and pattern making. I have

a history of sewing and a familial connection to quilting; my grandmother was a quilter, and she passed the skill along to my mother who was an avid sewer and seamstress. She made clothes for my siblings and I and taught me to sew at a young age. Studying quilt making strengthened my fascination with the process of piecing and binding things together. There are parallels in this process to the way I build my glass textiles. My process involves a growth in scale through the multiplication of singular pieces; particulates of frit and beads adhered together into gloves or cocoons, square panels pieced together to make a blanket, scales growing off one another to make a dress.

One of my largest artistic influences has been Janine Antoni and her more body-centric work, like *Lick and Lather* and *Gnaw*. *Lick and Lather* features seven cast chocolate busts and seven cast soap busts of the artist, posed facing each other, activated through the body and respectively licked or used to wash her body. *Gnaw* comprises of two 600 pound cubes of lard and chocolate, each chewed and nibbled by the artist. The body acts as subject and activator; leaving marks on both the sculptural object and the body used as tool. In my pieces *Like A Peach* and *Lay Me Down to Rest*, the body and the object are marked and altered by the action of performance. Antoni's work uses the body as a perpetual art making tool, utilizing the audience's empathy and humanity as an emotional hook. My work aims to do the same, transferring my emotions and struggles into a visceral experience that the audience can digest. Antoni also uses everyday gestures in her work. They are gestures that both artist and audience use every day, and the simplicity of these gestures make the work relatable. We know how it feels to lick and consume something, just as we know how it feels to wash and clean something. We can imagine our own bodies in the place of the performing body. In *Lay Me*



*Down to Rest*, the performer's final action of the is to cover their body with the blanket, close their eyes, and breathe. This is the last thing one does before falling asleep and succumbing to the day's end; a unifying action for both artist and audience after the struggle to get to that place of comfort.

I am also highly influenced by Nick Cave. His *Soundsuits* are shells that both obscure and protect. They are activated by a body and conceal the body's identity, and simultaneously make the wear's body loud and unavoidable. He uses a variety of materials - found objects, fur, fiber, sticks, buttons - to create all encompassing suits. Cave's *Soundsuits* use gesture as activation. Personally, I see the movements of the body created while wearing the sound suits as gestures of freedom and liberation from identity. *Push* was my interpretation of a soundsuit. The form dictated how the performing body could act. It made the rules. But unlike Cave's *Soundsuits* the performance slowly revealed the obscured body, a liberated identity. The struggle to break free was both the sound and dance of the suit.

## CONCLUSION

My thesis body of work explored ideas of identity and comfort through glass and the body. I felt that through my material exploration, I was able to find new ways to utilize both the glass particulate and alternative glass processes to explore ideas of identity and skins.

My process begins in one of two ways - first, from the desire to express a certain feeling, memory, or experience, and second, from a desire to expand or explore a new process or medium. Through working on my thesis, I ebbed between both beginnings

but discovered that the body of work began with my desire to create glass textiles. This new process is full of excitement. I wanted to push any and all options I could think of through combining glass, silicone, and the body - scale, different types of glass, different ways of building and levels of interaction. The shift from wearable object to performative object, or body interactive, was the largest change during my research.

I imagine this body of work expanding in multiple ways. I have become more interested in abstracting my physical body. The progression has been from representation to abstraction; from *Shed*, where the body is directly used to create the object and documented fully through photographs, to *Push* and *Lay Me Down to Rest*, where the body becomes abstracted through the object and its interactions, to *Like a Peach*, where the body was abstracted through framing, to *What Lies Beneath*, where the body becomes abstracted and only present through a shadow that ebbs and flows from view. I am interested in exploration through that abstraction via framing, my glass screens, and textiles.

This body of work has allowed me to discover a personal value in performative work. By using my body as either material or activator, I have gained a feeling of artistic freedom that I had never felt through object based practices. While my work is still interested in exploring the same things - identity, perception, comfort - the addition of the body as material and performer has given me a deeper connection to my practice and ultimately to my expression.

Beyond creating the work featured in *Aventuresence* my practice has allowed me to develop a way of making through glass textiles and performance that feels exciting. My relationship with glass has expanded from passive bystander to active participant,

through the inclusion of my body and a deep, personal exploration of my own identity.

My process of creating glass textiles is something that will continue to grow and inform both my relationship with glass and contemporary art practices.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS/WORK IMAGES



Above:  
Panoramic view of AVENTURESCENCE  
The Yards Collective, Rochester, NY  
April 2019

Photograph by Elizabeth Lamark



Right:  
*Shed*  
Glass, Silicone, Body  
2018

Photography by Eric Meeker



Above:  
*Push*  
 Glass, Silicone, Body  
 Stills from performance video  
 2018



Left:  
*Push* (installation view)  
 Photography by Elizabeth Lamark





Above (left) and Below:  
*Like a Peach* (installation views)  
 Glass, Silicone, Wedding Gloves, Body  
 Dimensions of gloves : 13" x 5 1/2" x 2 1/2"  
 Dimensions of books : 3 3/4" x 5" x 1/2"  
 2018

Installation photography by Elizabeth Lamark



Above (right):  
*Like a Peach*  
 Photographs bound into books : 3" x 4"  
 2018

Photography by Jacob Polcyn-Evans



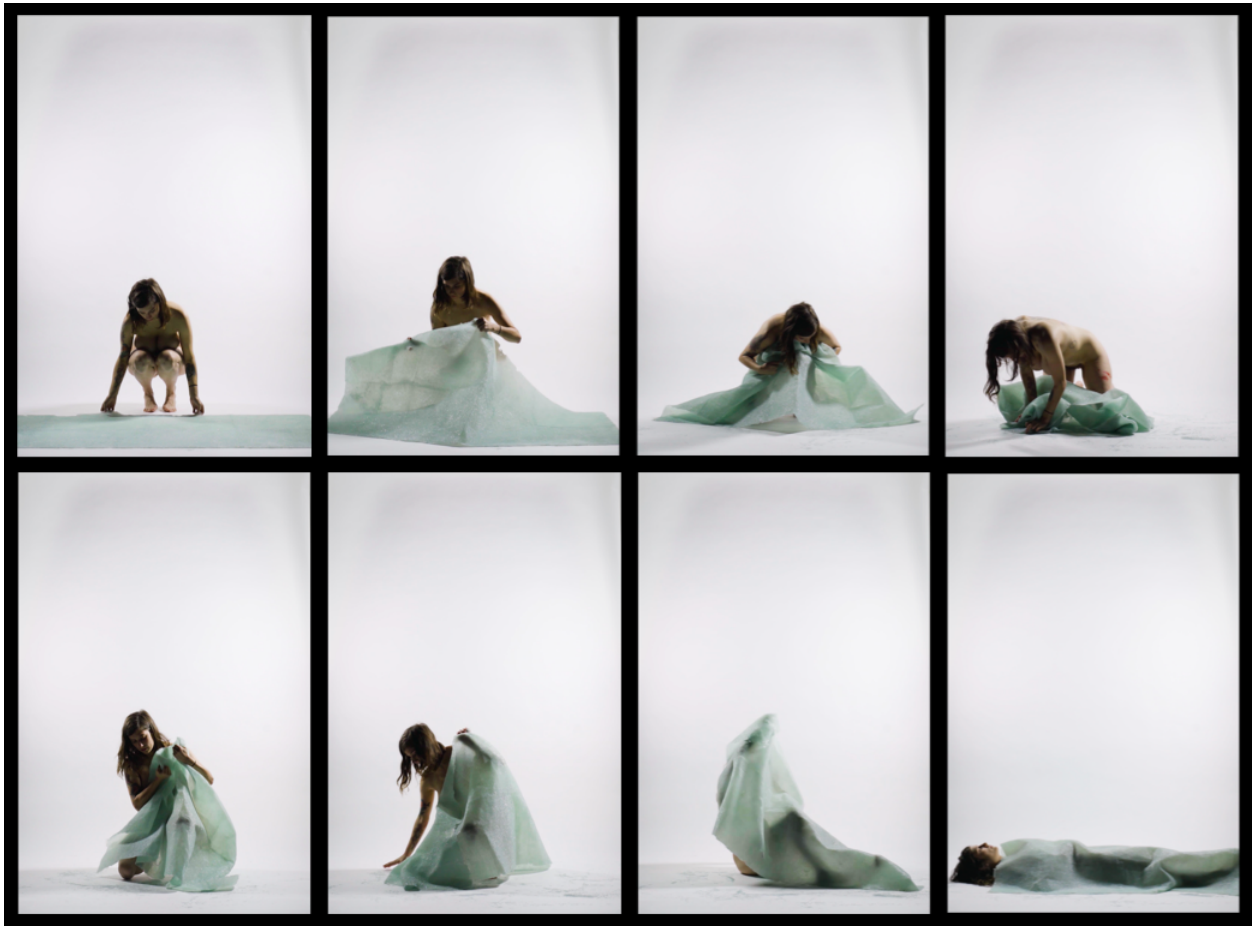




*Amorphous Flesh*  
Reflective Glass Beads, Silicone, LEDs, Sensors,  
Glass Head Pins, Chair  
31" x 32" x 32"  
2018

Photography by Elizabeth Lamark





Above:  
*Lay Me Down to Rest*  
 Glass, Silicone, Body  
 Stills from performance video  
 2018

Video by Jacob Polcyn-Evans

Left:  
*Lay Me Down to Rest* (installation view)  
 Photography by Elizabeth Lamark







Above (left and right):  
*What Lies Beneath*  
 Reflective Glass Beads, Body, Projection  
 37" x 56" x 1/4"  
 2019



Below (left):  
*What Lies Beneath* (installation view)  
 Photography by Elizabeth Lamark





*Mend Series (Ram, Deer)*  
Skulls, Glass  
Various dimensions  
2013-2014

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